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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 005802

SIPDIS

NOFORN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/31/2015

TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#) [ETRD](#)

SUBJECT: CLIPPED WINGS: COLOMBIA'S AIR ASSET LIMITS

Classified By: Charge Milton K. Drucker, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S) Colombia's size and terrain make military air operations vital to the nation's security. However, the Colombian Air Force (COLAF) accounts for less than 8 percent of the 2005 defense budget. The COLAF's primary offensive aircraft are based in Cundinamarca and Atlantico Departments, which limits their already marginal international deterrent value. Most of the COLAF's offensive helicopters -- used in anti-insurgency operations -- are based in central Antioquia Department, but their value is limited by an operational radius of only 150 miles. Maintenance problems mean that probably less than 70 percent of all COLAF air assets are operable at any given time. A lack of infrastructure in the Plan Patriota Phase 2B area of operations would severely limit the COLAF's ability to quickly reinforce COLMIL ground troops in the event of a major FARC offensive. Despite repeated criticism from the USG regarding specifications and uses being skewed to Brazil's Embraer, the GOC is once again actively considering the purchase of new light attack aircraft. The Colombian Congress approved the purchase on March 15, however the COLAF has not finalized the contract yet. End Summary.

Background

2. (C) Colombia's size and diverse geography make military air operations essential to the Government's efforts to provide security to a nation plagued by narco-terrorist violence. Unfortunately, COLAF lacks the assets to operate in many parts of the country. Moreover, recent agreements by the Spanish and Brazilians to sell defense equipment to Venezuela have raised concerns within the Colombian Ministry of Defense (MOD) that Colombia is increasingly outgunned by its neighbor.

3. (U) The COLAF's 2005 budget of roughly 690 billion pesos, or approximately USD 265 million, is 7.5 percent of the total defense budget. The COLAF is the smallest of the military branches, with only 9,000 military and 3,000 civilian personnel.

Capabilities

4. (S) The COLAF possesses four categories of air assets: (1) offensive "attack" aircraft and helicopters, (2) transportation aircraft and helicopters, (3) reconnaissance aircraft, and (4) training aircraft. The total force is reported to be 172 fixed- and rotary-wing assets. We suspect, however, that only 60-70 percent are operable at any given time, with many assets grounded by maintenance problems.

5. (S) The COLAF's primary "attack" aircraft, assets capable of strafing or bombing a target from the air, are stationed at Palanquero Air Base in northern Cundinamarca Department (CACOM-1) and Pauwels Rodriguez Air Base near Barranquilla in Atlantico Department (CACOM-3). These aircraft, which include 12 Israeli-manufactured Kfirs, 9 French-manufactured Mirage M-5s, and 13 US-manufactured A-37 Dragonflies, serve as deterrents against foreign air attack, support Army and Marine troops in the field, and participate in Air Bridge Denial operations to intercept civilian aircraft suspected of transporting narcotics. Given COLAF base locations, it would take Colombian jets approximately 45 minutes to reach the Venezuelan border and at least an hour to reach any of Colombia's other international borders. None of the local illegal armed groups have offensive air capabilities.

6. (S) The COLAF possesses additional offensive aircraft scattered sparingly throughout the country. These include 6 AC-47 Fantasma aerial gunships, 8 AT-27 Tucanos, and 5 OV-10 turboprops, all of which are used to support ground troops in combat.

7. (S) Most of the COLAF's offensive helicopters -- used in

counter-insurgency operations -- are based at Rio Negro Air Base, near Medellin in Antioquia Department. Most COLAF strike helicopters are AH-60 Arpias with an operational radius of approximately 150 miles, and are used primarily for ground troop support. These should not be confused with the 141 NAS-supported Police and Army helicopters dedicated to counternarcotics missions.

18. (S) For transport, the COLAF uses 7 C-130 Hercules 4-engine turboprops, 2 CASA CN-235 twin-engine turboprops, and one Boeing 707, all of which are based at CATAM Air Base in Bogota. These fly resupply and transport missions throughout the country. One of these transport planes is based part-time in south-central Colombia near the Plan Patriota Phase 2B area of operations, but usually returns to a more secure area when not needed for specific operations. COLAF transport helicopters are based primarily at Rio Negro, although bases in Bogota, Cali, outside Villavicencio (Apiay), Barranquilla, northern Cundinamarca (Palanquero), and Tres Esquinas normally have one transport helicopter at the base.

Limited Options in the Air

19. (C) The COLAF's limited troop transport resources have not prevented it from evacuating the sick and wounded and soldiers rotating out of combat zones. In summer 2004, however, the COLAF asked the Embassy to help it withdraw troops that had served three consecutive months in combat. We were only able to fill this gap with contract air for the most part, but it demonstrates a weakness in the ability to remove troops without outside resources.

110. (C) Current resource constraints would limit the COLAF to transporting only about 1,000 COLMIL reinforcements a day. For the COLAF to permanently base air assets in the region to more easily conduct air strikes and provide support to COLMIL ground forces, it would have to establish and secure refueling locations in largely hostile, inhospitable territory. Helicopters provide troop transport within the Phase 2B area of operations, although the heavy jungle canopy prevents them from landing in most areas, so hoists and other methods are often used to infiltrate and extract troops.

Shopping Around

111. (C) Beginning in the late 1990s, the MOD began investigating the possibility of purchasing new light attack aircraft. In 2002, SOUTHCOM Commander General Hill counseled then-Defense Minister Marta Lucia Ramirez against such a course at a time when the COLAF's C-130 fleet needed modernizing. Hill argued that the USD 250 million needed to buy 20 light attack aircraft could be put to better use improving force transportation.

112. (C) Last December, Vice-Minister of Defense Jorge Eastman discussed the proposed purchase with Washington visitors. He told the group about disagreements within the GOC over whether to purchase the aircraft, and, if so, which to buy. For example, the Senate pressed Minister of Defense Uribe to abandon the solicitation last fall because it had specifications only open to Brazil's Embraer Tucano aircraft. The debate ended when the Colombian Congress approved the budget request purchase of light attack aircraft on March 15 and the Defense Ministry reopened a solicitation with slightly more flexible requirements.

113. (C) The solicitation for bids reopened on May 10 and was slated to last four weeks. Some companies, most notably Lockheed Martin, complained that the "new" specifications still allowed only Embraer to make a competitive bid. Although COLAF extended the deadline by two weeks, on June 14, Embraer submitted the only bid, offering to provide twenty-two planes for USD 234.56 million. While the contract has not been finalized, the other five interested bidders dropped out before the solicitation closed. According to influential daily El Tiempo, Eastman expressed his disappointment that no other companies submitted bids. He added that the contract winner would be announced in September, leaving the door open to a possible reopening of the bidding process if the Colombian Congress remains dissatisfied with the non-competitive results. According to Eastman, the GOC plans to use the new aircraft to mount an air offensive against the FARC. In addition, he said the GOC entertains hopes of starting its own indigenous aircraft industry, following the example of Brazil's Embraer.

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